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Partition and Pinjar

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of India's partition and its aftermath, focusing on the communal violence and apathy experienced by the people, particularly through the writings of Amrita Pritam.

Key Words : Partition, Pinjar, Indian Freedom, Death, Destruction

INTRODUCTION

The bloody partition of India in 1947 marked the ultimate conclusion of the country's freedom war. It was one of the most terrifying and catastrophic events in recent memory, and one of the greatest human convulsions in history. Indescribable suffering, rape, kidnapping, migration, damage, rioting, and savage violence all followed it. A famous couplet by Faiz Ahmed Faiz that incapsulates the disillusion and disappointment accompanying freedom from imperialist power goes like this:

Yen dngalar Ujala, yeh sahbgazidasehr

Who intzarthajiska, woh yeh sahar to nahin.

The irony and pathos of the situation are well reflected in the words of the poet. History regrettably fails to do tangible justice to certain aspects of this tragedy and often represents the face of conventional or institutional politics.

A generation was unwillingly caught up in the aching communal conflicts of the forties. Urvashi Butalia, in her famous book The Other Side of Silence, has noted that more than ten million people crossed the western border and somewhere around one million people were demised, while 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped, all in a period of a few months, but sadly, these human dimensions and the analogous tormenthad no place in books on the partition. Literature, being a polyphonic discourse, portrays their apathy and indignation with the aid of stories, poems, diaries, eyewitness accounts, verbal narratives, and, of course, novels and autobiographies. After an unusual lull on the subject for some time, there has been an attempt to derive the tragic story of the Subcontinent Partition. I call it tragic not only because of the anguish and suffering of those who lived through the times but also due to a sense of inevitability that came associated with it a few years before India's independence.

The paper has been divided into two parts. The first part of the paper explores the literary recreation of the events that led to partition, and the second focuses on one particular text, *i.e. Pinjar.* It was widely and perhaps wrongfully assumed that the idea of a separate Muslim state originated from M.A.O. College in Aligarh or Syed Ahmed Khan. Actually, the initiative toward the creation of a separate Muslim homeland had its own contextual and ideological compulsions. Undoubtedly the so-called "Islamic gentry "had raised the voice of "minority-ism" and expressed a fear of Hindu domination; of a threat from British "Educational policies; and powerful Hindu revivalist campaigns.

According to Mushir Ul Hasan, Syed Ahmed Khan in his 1883 speech had clearly expressed the fear of being ruled by an elective representative government and

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majority rule and other grave apprehensions caused by Hindu revivalism and its stridently anti-Muslim posture. Although he had not proposed a separate Muslim state. So, these factors together with the theories and institutions for separatism developed by religious and political leadership in the last decade of the 19th century, led to the heightening of communitarian consciousness. However, this process, until the Muslim League burst on the political scene was a slow one. Indisputably, the marks of cleavage in North India were more sharply drawn between the Shias and Sunnis than between Hindus and Muslims. Briefly, it can be stated that the creation of separate state was the outcome of a particular scenario around the end of the Second World War. The beleaguered war time government looked towards Jinnah for political support and legitimized his position. The well-known breakdown of cross - community alliances, and the collapse of coalition governments in Punjab and Bengal helped Jinnah's dreams turn into reality. Such a thing was implausible a decade ago i.e., in 1937 because in the 1930s there was no preparation for a future Pakistan. There was not an Islamic flag and no shared objectives. Iqbal, whose patriotic poems continued to be sung in schools and colleges all over the subcontinent referred to sovereign states being formed, not all Muslim and which were to be based on the consonancy of languages, race, history, religion and resemblance of common stakes. He was indisputably not singing the swan songs of the Pakistan movement.

Moreover, the Muslim League's leadership was fragmented and battered. There were frequent factional fights. Bereft of its populist Muslim slogans, the League showed consensus with Congress on all political and agrarian subject matters. As matter of fact, the League was seen as the wing of the Congress. Jinnah had visions of patriotic people walking hand in hand. However, a later failure of Congress, according to Mushir UlHusan, to come to an unanimity with Muslim candidates in the 1937 elections proved to be a political miscalculation.

Thus, the ill-advised position of Congress (in the summer of 1937) created spaces for the consolidation of the Muslim league. UP saw protests against alleged arrogance and oppression of Hindu officials. In Bihar and the Central Provinces, the singing of Bande Matram and the hoisting of the Congress flag were serious issues of communal mobilization (besides local governance problems like housing schemes). Dissensions between Hindus and Muslims, over other issues, easily degenerated into religious squabbles.

Then onwards, a frequent degeneration of social issues into religious ones, the heightening of communal consciousness and the strengthening of the League led to the partition.

Now I will come to the second part of my paper and see how the genre of films deals with partition literature referring especially to the emergence of the female voice in *Pinjar,* which is posited as a recreation of the eponymous novel by Amrita Pritam. The opening up of voice, in the novel as well as the film, is an exercise in power. However, an understanding of adaptations that take place in the film directed by Dr. Chander Prakash Dwivedi is vitally important to the discussion. The film apparently and to a logical extent valorizes the emergence of feminine voice against the communal tension. However, the pattern of dominant patriarchy and the subversive majoritarian nationalism are only thinly veiled. Pritam's novel, in contrast, has little pretensions of the patriarchy not being dominant, and the narrative is not saffron in colour. In Dwivedi's narrative, one suspects, as observed by Purnima Mankekar, that the discourses of Indian and Indian nationalism have been appropriated by Hindus, who claim to be the true nationalists. Secondly the exploration of the psyche and the growth of the protagonist through various encounters –with the self and with selves outside – establishing the women as Pinjars – skeletons, bereft of unique human shapes and identities and of associated power to affect their fates, is the most significant theme of this gripping and tersely-structured novel by Pritam.

Now lesser about the story of the film. It is the August of 1946 when the film starts. The story revolves around five foremost characters: Pooro – a Hindu girl and a victim of catastrophic circumstances; Rashid, the desperate-for-revenge Muslim abductor; Ramchand; the Hindu boy, to whom Pooro is engaged to be married; Trilok, the estranged unhappy brother; and Pooro's father, who refuses to support, accept or rescue Pooro after her abduction. Rashid kidnaps Pooro the Hindu, Sahukar's daughter to avenge the dishonor of his aunt by the Sahukar's. After fifteen days, Pooro escapes from captivity, and reaches her house in pitch darkness of night, emotionally and physically drained, only to be rejected by her parents, who though heart-broken, are scared and conscious of preserving and guarding the family honour, wish that she had perished at birth itself. Alienated, Pooro is destined to marry Rashid, whom she can never forgive.

There is, at best, in the end only a qualified acceptance on her part when in the 1947 riots, Rashid helps in the relocation and rescue of Lajo, Trilok's wife and Pooro's sister-in-law.

The film, if I may state, is not only a post-partition and a period narrative but is also Kargil-spawned or a post-Kargil discourse produced to draw maximum attention in a climate of dual celebration – one after Kargil victory and the other continuing from having completed the epochal fifty years of freedom. The aim was to encash the euphoria.

The coming of the film in October 2003 was a thought-out part of a 'strategic forgetting'. The novel came out first in 1950 in Punjabi, then in 1962 in Hindi and in English in 1970. Tamas, by Bhisham Sahani, was written twenty-three years after the partition enabling it to critique the past from a vantage but its screening as a telefilm was done on Doordarshan in 1988 (four years after the 1984 riots, which saw the murder of the thousands of Sikhs). The gap appears to be a sort of strategic amnesia, a strategy to escape or bury the painful memories of the holocaust and also a part of an official majoritarian nationalist agenda. On the same lines, the silence of Hindus during the 1984 riots perhaps indicated the same sort of strategic forgetting and again complicity with the majoritarian national agenda. Dwivedi's *Pinjar*, coming, when it does in October 2003 is an adaptation along the lines of the so - called popular or commercial Hindi cinema. The era is that of a revival and considerable success of period films. *Gadar* was a phenomenal success (even if for its jingoistic bashing of Pakistan) and so was *Lagaan,* nominated for the Oscar Award. The two movies on Shaheed Bhagat Singh and *1857 A Rising* are analogous illustrations. The film narrative of *Pinjar,* apparently innocent and balanced engineers the masculine Hindutva ideal and subversively plays down the Muslim. In the film, Rashid, the abductor of Hindu girl Pooro lives with a heavy conscience; gets no forgiveness from his forcefully wedded wife Pooro-turned-Hamida; lives cumbered with guilt and rejection; writhes in anguish on finding his unborn child to be a source of derision and contamination for Hamida; and is twice denied the happiness of a much-cherished fatherhood – first when Hamida aborts as though aided by a psychosomatic sanitation of her body or as perhaps it was divinely ordained and secondly when the Hindus, in a convoluted desire to protect their "dharma" and creed forcefully take away an infant from Rashid and Hamida whom they have been nurturing for six months. (The child, infact, has been borne by a madwoman, who dies unseen and unattended during childbirth, Hamida discovers the dead mother and the frail child in the field and adopts it.) Extremely important here is the context of the novel where Rashid appears to have been somewhat accepted by Hamida. After the birth of a son, out of a "Conflict of hate and love, love and hate were born Hamida's son and Hamida's love for her husband Rashida." And later after Pooro's meeting with Taro "Hamida wanted to forget that Rashida had abducted and wronged her. She longed fervently to make love to him." Ironically, Rashid in Pritam's text enjoys fatherhood and fondly brings up two sons. In the novel, the village Hindus realize their folly and return the dying infant to Hamida. The child is restored and becomes robust. In taking care of the child Rashida, and Hamida shares a sympathy for the marginalized. The song "Darda Mariya ... Kismat AndhiBavari ..." depicting a shattered Rashida is non-existent in spirit in the novel and there is no situation to evoke such intense sorrow. Thus, Dwivedi's Rashid appears to suffer much more than Pritam's Rashida as if he would have us gloat over his misery and enable us to say that his misfortune was well-deserved and derive satisfaction in his suffering.

In Pritam's text religion has a greater choking grip on the feminine gender. Her narrative demonstrates the complex fettering created by the dual and mutually catalytic mix of the subversive sides of religion and gender. However, it also shows the possibilities of individual growth and development despite the same as in the case of Hamida's initiation to knowledge after her encounters with the sorrows or with more 'Pinjars' (skeletons) like her: Kammo, Taro and the mad woman. On the contrary, Dwivedi's narrative upholds these very majoritarian nationalist notions of religion and gender. In the novel, Hamida can carve an empathic relationship of motherly and friendly affection for the twelve-year-old Kammo, even if for a short while but Dwivedi's Pooro is the much-celebrated, isolated and eternal suffering Sita. Ramchander also lauds the virtues of Sita in a song where Ram welcomes Sita with open arms only after she has qualified for the walking-on-fire test.

Another example is that of Lajo's politico-religious rescue. The film appears to celebrate the rescue of the Hindu girl from the evil Muslim and it happens only on the eastern side of the subcontinent. Ram, in Dwivedi, is the symbolic ideal and is ready to stay celibate for nearly fourteen years in the absence of a Janaki. He is unlike Pritam's character by the same name who prosaically marries Pooro's younger sister without lamenting over Pooro's disappearance. Dwivedi's adaptation portrays a*maryadapurush* in contrast to the ordinary mortal of Pritam's thus constructing and appeasing the notion of an idealistic Hindu in contrast to the villainous Muslims, who go about telling other Muslims to gather weapons and at other times attack Hindu *Kafilas*. Moreover, Hamida who is instrumental in saving Lajo, is essentially Pooro a product of Hindu upbringing.

Can *Pinjar* then be dismissed as a populist majoritarian nationalist narrative? Todo so would be robbing it of the power it lends to the female voice and subsequent feminist empowerment. The making of *Pinjar* itself constitutes the imparting of a voice to Amrita Pritam besides Pooro's and other marginalised women. The film opens and ends with the plaintive rendering of Amrita Prtiam's immortal poem on the partition, "*Aaj Akhan Waris Shah noonh*", where the 'poet exhorts the sympathetic Waris Shah to come back from his grave and lament over the fates of hundreds of women in and around Punjab. Yet another poem of Pritam's "*Charkha Chalati Kyun*" while operating within gender delineations and while partly affirming them, questions the passing of inheritance to sons and not to daughters. The daughters are exiled while the sons stay in palace-like i.e., secured homes. These two and other songs are carefully strung in the narratives and help to evoke the mood of the scenes. The songs are a mix of folk and popular lyrics. They so succinctly express the sentiments that numerous pages of prose would not be able to do.

Thus, fidelity to basic text is neither important nor unimportant. My criticism is not based on the idea of violation of or adherence to the novel but on the overall effect and hidden nuances of Dwivedi's work. It won't be out of place to remark that in Urvashi Butalia's non - fictional work *The Other Side of Silence*, the oral narratives record "past flowing into present" as a kind of coping strategy but in Dwivedi's narrative the case appears to be that of a masculine present flowing into a feminine rendering of the past.'

What is important is the voice that needs attention because to assume that "In a few more decades living of memories of pain will fade as the generation of survivors disappears," sounds simplistic. I am here referring to such a comment in the cover story of "The Week" (dated Oct. 17, 2004) on *Veer Jaara*, a love story by Yash Chopra with partition as background. It would be pertinent to regard partition in the words of Ravikant and Saint in *Translating Partition* as a "metaphor for civilization crises". These crises keep returning in various forms such as the 84's riots the Babri Masjid demolition, the Bhagalpur, riots, the Kargil war and the Godhara Madness. Since the chastity or violation of the woman's body even today stays metonymic of the honor or dishonor for families and communities, would the voice against the use of women's bodies as objects of sexual savagery continue to be empowered? That is important .

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